

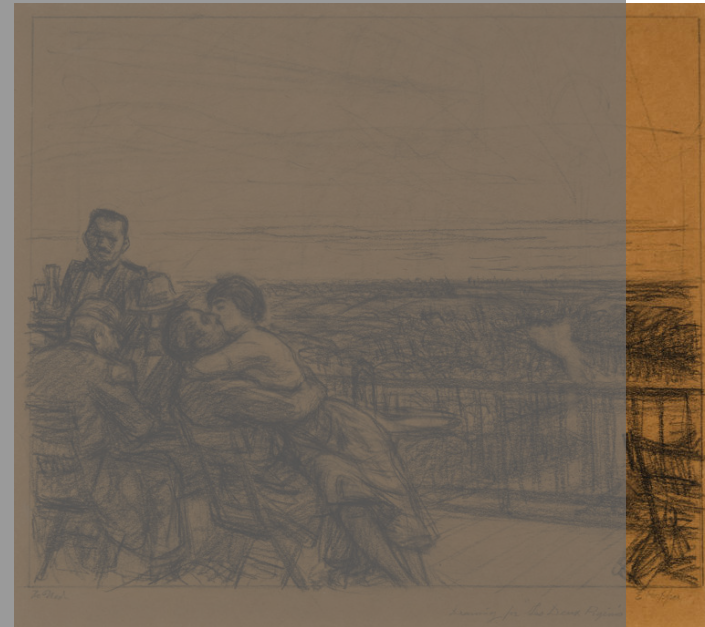
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Edward Hopper 1882 – 1967

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Few painters can claim the strange alchemy of mixtures that attended the career of Edward Hopper. The term always hung on his work was “Realist,” and yet no admirer has failed to notice the magical, uncanny quality to his scenes. Indeed, when the Whitney Museum launched their new building in 2015, the inaugural exhibition of the permanent collection placed Hopper’s masterpiece, *Early Sunday Morning* (1930) in a gallery themed as “surrealism.” His artistic training and his picture-making technique were rooted in the Ash Can realism of Robert Henri, and Hopper shared many of his painting locales with members of the Henri circle. Quite unlike these urban realists, Hopper remained among America’s favorite painters well after the explosion of



Drawing for Etching 'Les Deux Pigeons', 1920

modernism and abstract expressionism. His most famous work, *Nighthawks*, is an American *Starry Night* or a modernist *Mona Lisa*, approached with awe and devotion as toward holy relics. A critic in the 1970s observed, “Even during the 1950s his reputation was secure, and artists sometimes couple Jackson Pollack and Edward Hopper as twin poles of American individualism and artistic integrity” [Carl Baldwin, “Realism: The American Mainstream,” *Realites*, April 1973, p. 117]. Hopper’s reputation is more secure today than ever. While much of his work describes a very particular time and place, the almost documentary silence in which he worked has given his work a timelessness that updates each generation. Early in his career, Hopper vocally supported the “crystallization of American art into something native and distinct,” and despite the very real American-ness that he achieved, he is one of the very few American painters of the era that have true international renown. His talent in oil was matched by his achievements in watercolor and etching. The

foremost scholar on Hopper, Gail Levin, points out that his work in illustration was almost a dirty secret to the artist – little observed and never dwelled upon, but an important part of his work nonetheless. Perhaps most striking, Hopper's work was popular all his life—from the early 1900s when Rockwell Kent called Hopper “the John Singer Sargent of [Robert Henri’s] class,” through the period when he was favorably twinned with Jackson Pollock. This alchemy of energy and restraint, reality and twilit dream, of narrative and silence meld in Hopper's silent scenes.

Edward Hopper was born in Nyack, New York 1882, the second child of middle-class Baptists. When he graduated from Nyack High School in 1899, he began taking classes in illustration in New York City with the notion of a career in illustration, a stop-gap measure from the high art he quietly aspired to. The following year he transferred to the New York School of Art where he studied, without perfect satisfaction, under the

school's founder, William Merritt Chase.
Chase's name then was a mark of distinction,
and Hopper, as Gail Levin points out, used it
in self-promotional cards until at least 1916
[Gail Levin, *Edward Hopper: The Art and the
Artist* (1980), p. 17]. Hopper certainly
distanced himself from Chase as early and
often as he could, however, and from his
own account the most important influence
from the New York School of Art was
Robert Henri.

Henri joined the Chase School (as it was
known) faculty in 1903, and Hopper took to
him immediately, calling him “the most
influential teacher I had” [as quoted in Levin
(1980), p. 17]. He continued, “Men didn’t
get much from Chase. . . Henri was a
magnetic teacher.” Henri was a master of
portraiture, but the greatest impact he left on
a generation of young painters was his
admonition to find painting subjects in life,
be it in the streets and slums or the solitary
backwoods. The dictum resonated with a
generation of craftsman who were already

making their way in newspaper illustration. The Philadelphia Four – Glackens, Shinn, Sloan, and Luks – had started their careers drawing for the *Philadelphia Record*, but soon became Henri disciples. These young draftsmen were already out in the streets for their reportorial work, and as they advanced towards fine art, they broke ground as what would be much later termed “Ashcan realism.” Henri, also from Philadelphia, helped brought this new aesthetic and philosophy to a group of younger men who advanced many of these techniques and practices, but now with a more uniquely American quality. This younger group included George Bellows, Rockwell Kent, Stuart Davis, and Edward Hopper. Notable among all of these artists is that almost all of them made prints, and all of them had illustration backgrounds. Kent embraced illustration and is today perhaps best known for his illustration work. Bellows’ is best known for his boxing pictures, he painted only a handful—but his boxing prints were numerous and latched onto the public

consciousness. Stuart Davis is the only of these painters to move entirely into abstraction, but he shared with his cohort the lifelong expedition to find a uniquely American artform.

Hopper shared the complicated relationship with Americanism, but he largely suppressed his early work in illustration. The flavor of his upbringing certainly lingers in even his very late work. He left Henri's class in 1905 and took work in commercial illustration until 1906, when he finally gave it up. In the 19th century, an aspiring fine artist would not be “finished” before studying the Old Masters in Europe, but Hopper's lot was not cast in this manner, nor were the followers of Henri bound by the customs of the previous generation. So it seems a little odd in hindsight that a painter who would become final word in American art should go to Paris to study, but that's just what he did in 1906, staying through the following summer. He became acquainted with impressionism during his stay, and made some stylistic

inroads through his friend, the fellow Henri alum Patrick Henry Bruce, but he later denied the impact of this stay. “Whom did I meet? Nobody. I’d heard of Gertrude Stein, but I don’t remember having heard of Picasso at all...Paris had no great or immediate impact on me” [Ibid., p. 24]. Whatever import it imparted, Paris drew him back in 1909 and again in 1910.

“It took me ten years to get over Europe,” he later regretted. Those ten years were spent developing his mature style as well as discovering etching as a medium. At the same time, he continued to work in illustration, and he continued to fail to sell paintings. By the beginning of the following decade, he had his first one man show. The Whitney Studio Club had opened two years before, and would become the Whitney Museum of American Art. For Hopper, age 37, it was a turning point: he sold no canvases at his first solo exhibition, but it began the growth of his positive momentum.

In the next few years, Hopper found his footing rapidly. In 1924, he married Josephine Verstelle Nivinson. Jo, as she was called, was herself a painter (as well as an erstwhile model for Robert Henri) and was a major supporter and organizer of her husband's work. Her boosterism had actually begun well before their marriage: in 1923, it was Jo, not Edward, who was invited to show a half-dozen watercolors at the Brooklyn Museum. "I got over there and they liked the stuff and I started writing and talking about Edward Hopper, my neighbor . . . They knew him as an etcher, but they didn't know he did watercolors" [as quoted by Levin (1980), p. 36]. The Brooklyn Museum exhibited Hopper's watercolors alongside Nivinson's, and ultimately it was Edward who received critical attention for his works, while Jo's went largely ignored.

Josephine's extensive journaling has been a critical boon to historians in piecing together Hopper's work, and her stylistic suggestions for her husband certainly redirected the

trajectory of his career. The year after their marriage, she gave Hopper an extensive book on Edgar Degas, helping him to resolve some of his work in etching and composition. In addition to being Hopper's exclusive model for the rest of his career, she also kept her husband painting by way of competitive inspiration: when Jo began a fresh canvas, Edward was goaded into action [Levin, *Edward Hopper: An Intimate Biography* (1998), p. 326]. Levin notes that, the following year, "Hopper arrived at his artistic maturity, having resolved a variety of influences and experiments into the creation of a personal statement" [Levin (1980), p. 39]. The important confluence of his talented wife, an aesthetic breakthrough, and his first solo exhibitions can only be compounded by another hard-won victory: his work started to sell. At Hopper's second solo show, in 1924 at the Frenk K. M. Rehn Gallery, all eleven works sold, along with another five that hadn't hung. Among the collectors who acquired Hopper's watercolors was George Bellows, a plaudit of no small significance.

Many of Hopper's most iconic images—his moody “house portraits”—were painted in Gloucester, Massachusetts, but he was an extensive traveler beyond the quaint seaside town. “You know how beautiful things are when you're travelling,” he wrote in 1956 [as quoted by Harriet G. Warkel, *Paper to Paint: Edward Hopper's 'Hotel Lobby'* (2008), p. 21]. The painter first went to Gloucester in 1912 with his friend Leon Kroll, and would summer there in 1923 and 1924. By 1923, the town was “teeming with artists,” as one historian put it, including John Sloan, Stuart Davis, and Milton Avery [Virginia Mecklenburg, *Edward Hopper: The Watercolors* (1999), p. 23]. Hopper seems to have been untroubled by the town's growing popularity—his works from these years are noted for their unpeopled houses and their solitude—but by 1925 he nonetheless decided to summer elsewhere. He chose another destination of increasing popularity among painters: Santa Fe, New Mexico.

New Mexico had been a destination for

artists since the turn of the century, but only in the immediately preceding years had it begun to draw modernists. Hopper's friend Sloan bought a house there in 1920, and Hopper's former teacher Robert Henri had visited the Southwest in 1916, 1917, and 1922. Upon the strength of these and other endorsements, Hopper ventured west in June of 1925, staying on through much of September.

Hopper painted about a dozen watercolors during his summer in New Mexico. Without the familiar dormers of New England's seaside houses, Hopper's subject matter ranged widely across those few works. He executed three beautiful observations of locomotives and railroad lines, along with a single landscape featuring a figure (*La Penitente*), and at least two meticulous views of Santa Fe style architecture (*St. Francis' Towers*, and *Saint Michael's College, Santa Fe*). Many of the artists that painted in New Mexico reveled in the contact with the local culture, but Hopper avoided the "merely

observational” work that many of his Ashcan colleagues pursued. “Though I studied with Robert Henri I was never a member of the Ash Can School [sic.]. It had a sociological trend which didn’t interest me” [as quoted by Harriet G. Warkel, *Paper to Paint: Edward Hopper’s ‘Hotel Lobby’* (2008), p. 19]. As he eschewed the sociology of the Ashcan School, so too did he find little of import in examining with brush the European influences upon the Santa Fe style of architecture. Virginia Mecklenburg notes that Hopper did not send *Saint Michael’s College, Santa Fe* to Rehn Gallery, his dealer, proposing that “it may well be that he was uncomfortable presenting works representing a Europeanized aesthetic” [Mecklenburg, *Edward Hopper: The Watercolors* (1999), p. 45]. By contrast, the more humble structures of small towns and adobe houses seems to have fit perfectly into Hopper’s growing vernacular of quiet, evocative scenes.

Hopper continued to do well commercially with Rehn, who helped establish Hopper in

the distinctly American lineage of Winslow Homer. When *The New York Times* reviewed Rehn's 1926 group exhibition, "Today in American Art," the reviewer heaped praise on Hopper, whose *Sunday* received the top paragraph of the review, and upon the gallerist: "Mr. Rehn has done very well" ["Many Types of Art Are Now on Exhibition," in *The New York Times*, Feb. 28, 1926, p. 184]. By March of 1926, *The New York Times* was endorsing Rehn's view connecting Homer to Hopper. "You can put your finger on the weighted and clean edge of an Edward Hopper...and call [it] American," the reviewer observed ["New Art Viewed in the Galleries" in *The New York Times*, March 28, 1926, p. 187], continuing, "Winslow Homer is the great man." Hopper had become the next great man in this line.

Hopper only submitted seven of his Santa Fe watercolors to Rehn in October of 1925—not enough to justify a full show, despite the overwhelming success of the previous year's exhibition. The Santa Fe pictures would not

be exhibited until April of 1926, when they would hang along with eleven views of Gloucester and twenty-one prints at the St. Botolph Club in Boston [Gail Levin, *Edward Hopper: The Art and the Artist* (1980), p. 302].

He continued to show with Rehn through the decade, adding oils to his exhibitions. By the end of the decade, he had given up etching entirely as he became established for his work in oil. The following decade, he established studios on Washington Square and in South Truro, Massachusetts. In 1932, the National Academy of Design elected him an Associate – an invitation to an elite club that Hopper defiantly turned down. He carried a grudge for the Academy's earlier spurning of his paintings. His other accolades piled up: he was included in the very first Whitney Biennial in 1932, given a retrospective at MoMA in 1931 and another at the Arts Club of Chicago in 1934; he received a Corcoran Gold Medal in 1937, and a litany of awards in the following decades.

Meanwhile, Hopper was producing some of the best-loved paintings in American art.

House by the Railroad was the first masterpiece, in 1925 (24 x 29 inches, Museum of Modern Art, New York); *Early Sunday Morning* was painted in 1930 (35 x 60 inches, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York); *Room in New York* came in 1932 (29 x 36 inches, University of Nebraska Art Galleries, Lincoln); the iconic *Nighthawks* in 1942 (30 x 60 inches, Art Institute of Chicago); and *Approaching a City* in 1946 (27 x 36 inches, the Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.). (The last of these has proven a haunting contribution to the post-war American psyche, appearing, among many other places, in Tim Burton's 1989 *Batman* film).

Hopper's legacy is a vast tributary of intellectual and artistic work. His career stretched into the 1960s, where he stood as a bulwark of realism against the raging vacuum of abstract expressionism—a bulwark that necessarily provided cover for the

development of a new generation of realists, from Fairfield Porter to Eric Fischl. Photographers Gail Albert Halaban and Richard Tuchsman have taken Hopper's imagery in different directions, engaging with the source material in literal but often oblique manner. The intellectual resonance of Hopper's work is as strong as ever, as scholarship pours over the place of American art, the meaning of realism in the twentieth century, the psychological mysteries of his paintings as well as the existential angst they have been said to embody [see Zohreh Dalirian, "Alienation in Edward Hopper's and Jackson Pollock's Paintings: A Comparison and Contrast" (2010) and Zhenping Wang, "A Sartrean reading of American Artists: Walker Percey, Edward Hopper, and Mike Nichols, 1940-1970" (2012) for recent dissertations that typify the field]. *The Gaurdian* noted that, "without Hopper, we imagine, we'd never have had Tom Waits; Hopper makes us think back to Vermeer and Manet and Courbet, Degas and Adolph von Menzel. He looks forward to

Wim Wenders, Todd Haynes, John Cassavetes, Raymond Carver and a host of others” [Adrian Searle, *The Irreducible Bigness of Being*,” *The Guardian*, May 25, 2004]. It is noteworthy that this assessment should appear in a British paper.

Internationally, Hopper has recently gained renewed prominence, fueled by a phenomenally successful 2004 retrospective at the Tate Modern. *The Guardian* reported that the Tate exhibition had been seen by almost half a million visitors, making it the second most successful exhibition in the gallery’s history. The most popular show to date remains a Matisse-Picasso show from 2002 – excellent company for a painter who wasn’t given a sole exhibition until age thirty-two [“Hopper is Big Draw at Tate Modern,” *The Guardian*, Sept. 4, 2004]. After a period of reflection since his death in 1967, Edward Hopper has been placed at the very forefront of artists meditating on the beauty and pathos of life in the modern world.

22 E 80 ST, NYC 10075

212 879 8815

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